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ABSTRACT

A culturally-based approach to learning adopted by many Japanese students is hypothesized, and it is proposed that while it is effective in many areas of learning, it may hinder second language learning. Japan's politico-economic structures, geared toward efficiently manufacturing competent workers, encourages a psychology of procedure that tends to formalize knowledge and the learning experience. Common traits among Japanese students are identified: passivity in the learning process; preference for rote memorization and low tolerance for ambiguity; difficulty with self-expression; an unwillingness to stand out; preference for an either/or examination format, with unambiguously correct answers; lack of concern for generalizing; and extreme concern about examinations. Japanese students are encouraged by classroom practices to regard knowledge as fundamentally a list of facts, which should come in predetermined, easily memorized forms; only testable knowledge is legitimate, and knowledge should be authorized. Classroom techniques for language instruction in this context are offered. Contains seven references. (MSE)

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THE FORMALIZED LEARNING STYLE OF JAPANESE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The purpose of this essay is to describe what may be called a certain cognitive style adopted by many Japanese students. This cognitive style possesses certain strengths: it is very effective for quickly ingesting large amounts of information, memorizing "facts," and reproducing data in a formulaic manner. In short, it is useful for test-taking, which in Japan, is part of an elaborate mechanism that selects, sorts, and shunts students into a disciplined, highly stratified, and tightly managed workforce. However, this same cognitive style, if adopted too comprehensively and employed too readily by students, presents many problems in situations where a mentality of methods may actually hinder learning, such as the language classroom.

My talk pursues a cultural psychological approach: how culture (i. e., social structures, political relations, and economic interests) contours psychology. For my present purposes, "psychology" designates a local (Japanese) cognitive style that emphasizes procedures: a predilection for standardization, formalization, and relying on predetermined methods. I begin by describing the often noted characteristics of Japanese students. Due to time considerations, I will not discuss the very practical and political reasons supporting a particular style of learning, but here I merely note that Japan's politico-economic structures, geared toward efficiently manufacturing competent workers, greatly encourage a particular psychology; namely, a psychology of procedure that tends to formalize knowledge and the learning experience itself. This cognitive style does not just offer students procedures that facilitate the accomplishment of learning tasks; to a noticeable degree, it also shapes their perceptions about the way the world is put together.

METHODOLOGY

This presentation is based on data collected while teaching in Japan. I have taught full-time at a women's junior colleges for two years, and at another women's junior college part-time for two years. Currently, I am teaching full-time at a university, part-time at another university, and part-time at a women's junior college. I have taught and am teaching courses in Cultural Anthropology, Japanese Culture, seminars, Theories and Methods in Anthropology, English, and an advanced English class about Japan's political culture. My other experiences in Japan's educational system include seven months teaching English at a senior high school and as an assistant instructor at International Christian University in Tokyo. For actual data, I utilize students' essays, reports, homework, graduation theses, class presentations, instructor evaluations, and observation of how students pose questions and interact during class. I do not rely on questionnaires nor surveys.

MAJOR FEATURES OF THE COGNITIVE STYLE OF JAPANESE STUDENTS

For the sake of argument, I begin with the premise that there is an identifiable style of learning in the Japanese classroom. All societies have their own pedagogical theories, preferences, and styles. These educational approaches encourage certain grooves of thinking, certain habits of knowledge acquisition and processing. And these educational approaches themselves are shaped by local social, political, and economic expediencies and historical developments. There is, in short, no universal, trans-cultural way to teach and learn. Cultural specifics construct particular pedagogical approaches, and they shape how are the techniques and tools of teaching are employed.

Below I list a number of traits, often cited by non-Japanese and Japanese educators alike, that characterize the thinking habits of Japanese students. But before doing so, a few caveats are in order. The traits to be delineated cannot be applied to all students at all times, and there are undoubtedly important variations and exceptions among individuals.

Furthermore, there are other variables that must be taken into account, such as age, gender, and region. I would suggest that the reason a formalized learning style is so salient in the Japanese classroom is because first, other styles are rarely offered; and second, a lack of student motivation caused by various other reasons. In short, students adopt a highly formalized learning pattern by default, not because it monopolizes the way they think. It should be emphasized that though a formalized learning style does seem to be prominent in many spheres of Japanese social life, there are other styles of thinking. There is nothing deterministic, "nor anything uniquely Japanese," about the cognitive style I am discussing. Furthermore, I am not arguing that this cognitive style necessarily applies to all, or even many, spheres of Japanese social existence. Rather, this particular method of personal information management is context-dependent. In other words, there are special circumstances, i.e., examinations and classroom participation, in which this cognitive style readily manifests itself. To what degree these habits of thought apply to other social contexts is an open question.

(1) Japanese students are passive, and play a receptive rather than an active role in the learning process. In Japan, the role of the student is to listen, absorb, and retain information. To quote Rohlen, "The student is trained first to be a patient, persistent worker, a good listener, one preoccupied with details and correctness of form" (1983:269).

(2) Japanese students prefer rote memorization and seem noticeably uncomfortable without the target knowledge presented as easily memorizable, formulaic, and clear-cut facts. They seem to have a low tolerance for ambiguity.

(3) Japanese students have trouble expressing themselves. This description makes sense in a society where being "shy" is a strong cultural desirable. The word most often heard in this regard is *hazukashî*, a semantically loaded term trotted out to explain anything from the Japanese penchant for reticence, reluctance to express one's opinion, Japan's *haji no bunka* ("shame culture"), to an inability to master foreign languages. The significance of being shy is pointed out by Anderson, who relates it to what he calls "group-mindedness." Anderson explains how Japanese children are socialized to believe in "an unidentified, seemingly ubiquitous "someone,"" (1993:104), a sort of social spook equivalent to another key concept,

the *seken* (observing others). Besides "being shy," *hazukashî* may mean "ashamed," "disgraced," or "embarrassed." Indeed, this cultural desirable is intimately wrapped up with other norms such as modesty, "face," and reputation. Another related word is *komaru*. Though it basically means to be "worried," "troubled," or "annoyed," this word's actual usage often carries other connotations of feeling "embarrassed," "awkward," "confused," even "not knowing what to do." It is frequently heard among Japanese when describing feelings during a tense-filled situation or an unpleasant social encounter, such as not knowing an answer in class.

Perhaps shyness accounts for what Anderson calls "formalized speechmaking": According to Anderson, students, when called on, rather than a spontaneous or original presentation of ideas, perform in front of others. This tendency is rooted in elementary schools where "responses to the teacher's solicitations are often structured like mini-speeches: The student stands up straight, loudly presents an answer in a variety of Japanese more formal and closer to the written language than that of everyday conversation, and then sits down" (1993:105-6).

(4) Japanese students do not like to stand out. This, of course, is not always true, and has become something of a cultural cliché ("the nail that sticks out gets hammered down") when describing Japanese society. There are, it should be noted, situations when students do make it a point to stand out. Nevertheless, as a general rule, Japanese students, who are after all socialized to be reserved, spend a considerable amount of effort fitting in with the immediate social group and maintaining consensus, another powerful cultural variable. Anderson calls this "consensual decision-making," a value that is very much related to group-mindedness and "harmony." Not being conspicuous is manifested as "consensus checking": when called on and asked to take center stage, students will turn to their neighbors and discuss the response before attempting an answer. This is because "students want to speak for a group safely rather than make themselves vulnerable as individuals" (1993:102-3). Such consultations make take several minutes, and from the point of view of many western instructors, this behavior is disruptive and rude.

Here it is worth noting that I have heard from students that those who answer questions, volunteer opinions, or actively participate in class are looked down upon because they are causing disharmony among other students who prefer to be more reticent, or sometimes, recalcitrant. And, though students may be asked to state their personal opinions, individual insights, or original thoughts, pressure from peers discourage them from speaking their minds. This is a type of bullying *(ijime)*.

(5) Japanese students seem to prefer an "either/or" examination format. This trait is related to their preference for easily memorizable facts as listed above (see [2] above). Facts are either right or wrong, true or false. Since there must be only one unambiguously correct answer, it follows that multiple choice questions are popular testing formats. Essays and term papers, because they do not follow an "either/or" format, seem to tax students' ability. It is also worth mentioning that though writing exercises are certainly not unheard of in the Japanese educational system, because of the preference for objective exams, they do not seem to play the important role that they do in European and North American educational settings. Japanese students need to be actively engaged in the sense that they constantly need to be told what to do. They require stage directions. They are simply not used to working independently, and seem to be at a loss when given broadly or loosely defined assignments.

(6) Japanese students often appear to lack a concern for generalizing. And why should they be interested in abstract analysis and pattern recognition? They have been educated and socialized to assume that there is only one right answer. Therefore, they expect instructors to provide them with very concrete, specific types of information, not broad concepts that can be applied to various cases and situations. To quote Rohlen again,

> They learn to listen well and to think quickly, but not to express their ideas. Neither speaking nor writing is encouraged. Speculation, controversy, and interpretive relativism do not enter the classroom. Thought is weighted in favor of memory and objective problem solving with little official curricular interest in creativity of a

> humanistic or artistic kind. The pedagogy may seem Confucian, but the real explanation is the matter of passing entrance exams (1983:316).

(7) Japanese students are highly concerned about examinations. As they need to be, since any progress depends a great deal on how they perform on tests. The entire educational system is composed of a series of examination hurdles that students must successfully jump over to move up the ranks. Competition is fierce and there are few second chances.

> The university entrance exam is the dark engine driving high school culture. One wonders whether academic high schools could remain as orderly and serious if this pressure were absent. Without exams there would be less compliance with conventions and fewer limits on political squabbles and reform efforts. School systems and individual teachers would be more innovative and more independent of the Ministry of Education, and education itself would become more colorful and chaotic. I doubt that most Japanese would find such a development comfortable (Rohlen 1983:317).

Taken together, all these characteristics seem to encourage a passivity, or in other words, a locus of control that is exterior to the individual student.

THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE COGNITIVE STYLE OF JAPANESE STUDENTS

There is a tautological feel to much of the discussion about why Japanese students behave the way they do. Many Japanese, not surprisingly, know very well why a particular style of knowledge-acquisition is deeply rooted in Japan's education system: they will state that it springs forth from a politico-economically managed education system that overemphasizes examinations as a means to weed out less-than-desirable workers. This explanation, and not misty culturalist theorizings, is at the root of the Japanese style of learning.

Culturally-sanctioned notions, such as "shyness" and deference toward those in power, legitimize the interests of those who run the educational system. Together, government machinery, economic interests, and social norms work to produce obedient and efficient workers. In order to find those who have the powers of memory and the psychological stamina required to succeed in the Japanese work world, the educational system has been constructed along the lines of an elaborate testing mechanism whose function is to evaluate and place individuals in their appropriate level. Thus, as someone else phrased it, "The Japanese are producing an average adult citizen who is remarkably well suited to four requirements of modern industrial society: (1) hard, efficient work in organizations; (2) effective information processing; (3) orderly private behavior; (4) stable, devoted child rearing" (Rohlen 1983:305).

Given these goals of the Japanese politico-economic and educational system, it is not surprising that Japanese students handle information the way they do. They have developed a particular cognitive strategy that, given what occurs in the typical Japanese classroom, is a very rational response. Their study habits, preparation tactics, and attitudes toward learning are quite appropriate for an exam-centered system. Indeed, the very act itself of sitting for tests in Japan has a tremendous influence on the way students come to view knowledge-acquisition and learning. This is because the tensions, fears, and frustrations that surround the examination process socialize students to believe that they have few chances and a limited number of choices to make in their lives. All these emotions culminate and are magnified during the infamous "exam hell" season during which time the college and university entrance examinations are held.

THE SPECIFICS OF A MENTALITY OF METHODS

From this point, my talk becomes more focused as specify the characteristics of a psychology of procedural learning. Because students are taught that must ingest as much information as quickly and efficiently as possible, they are encouraged by classroom practices to regard knowledge as having the following characteristics:

(1) Knowledge is fundamentally a "list" of facts. Information should be made into an inventory, then indexed and catalogued. As a list, knowledge is composed of discrete bits of data. There may be unifying principles or underlying patterns that afford the discrete bits of information their purpose, general character, or some other significance, but such abstractions must take a back seat to the more pressing goal of mastering, through memorization, the list itself for examination and employment purposes. "Japanese high school education provides no intellectual roots, it turns out students long on information and short on intellectual understanding" (Rohlen 1983:267). This is why quite often students have trouble analyzing what each part contributes to the whole. I should emphasize that it is not that students cannot generalize; rather, it is more accurate to say that, given the classroom environment, they do not see the point of learning transfer.

(2) Because knowledge is conceived as a list, it should come in predetermined, easily memorizable forms. Knowledge that is not neatly packaged becomes regarded as unusable and suspect. Thus, knowledge-acquisition and learning become formulaic, conventionalized, and pre-packaged. The more concrete and specific it is, the better. Incidentally, it is worthwhile to note that, especially in the traditional arts (where imitative movements are afforded importance (cf. Buruma 1984:70), form, formal patterns, and proper forms *(kata)* predominate. Indeed, attuned to routines, regulations, and rules, many Japanese acquire a tendency to ritualize and perceive things in a "framed" manner (McVeigh 1994:63-65). This emphasis on pre-packaged knowledge is seen in various cultural spheres, conceived as "ways" *(-dô):* so that students learn *sadô* (tea ceremony); *shodô* (calligraphy); *jûdô* (judo); *kendô* (Japanese fencing); *kyûdô* (archery); *iaidô* (art of drawing the sword); *bundô* (learning); *bushidô* (samurai code of chivalry); *budô* (martial arts); and *aikidô* (a type of martial art). Also, Shinto means the "way of the gods" *(shintô).* On a grammatical note, the "way" of doing something is embedded in Japanese grammar. Any action may be spoken of as a formal pattern by adding *kata* (or less commonly, *yô)* onto verb stems (McVeigh 1994:64).

Here an anecdote is in order. After a talk by a famous scholar given to junior college students, the speaker asked if there were any questions or comments. At first, out of the

crowd of three hundred, no one raised their hand. Then, one student finally stood up and asked "what was the point of your talk?" I was struck by the directness of this question, and later asked a Japanese colleague about this, and was told that what the student was really asking was "how can I summarize your talk in a hundred words," because each student was required to write a short summary of the speech. This anecdote illustrates how practical demands shape a person's approach to knowledge acquisition and processing.

(3) Only testable knowledge is legitimate knowledge. Examining and being examined have acquired a centrality in Japanese society that is visible everywhere: cram schools *(juku)*, preparatory schools *(yobikô)*, publishers specializing in practice tests and guides, and an obsession with TV game shows, guessing matches, questionnaires, and quizzes.[1] This obsession with examinations has turned many Japanese into assiduous information gatherers.

(4) Ideally, knowledge should somehow be authorized. Because knowledge is vital to sitting for the all-important examinations, it becomes sacred. However, along with this faith in knowledge comes a fear that what is learned may be incorrect, that it may not be sanctioned. To guard against unorthodox forms of knowledge, students will make efforts to ensure that it comes from some irrefutable source, such as teachers. It must be endorsed, somehow ordained as official. This thinking leads to dictionary-dependency, text-devotion, and a tendency to assume that non-Japanese are "experts" on foreign languages by virtue of their ethnicity. It also encourages and supports a profitable publishing industry that cashes in on this concern with sanctified knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Refsing states that education in industrialized societies possess four basic functions: (1) education (teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, science, and other general skills); (2) socialization (training responsible citizens and members of society, who are well-mannered, caring, and aware of their society's central values, such as gender roles); (3) selection (channeling and distributing talent through the labor market using a series of examinations);

and (4) depository ("safekeeping" and holding "the young until they are ready for the labour market, and especially until the labour market is ready for them") (1992: 119). According to Refsing, Japan succeeds admirably in three functions mentioned above, except in education itself (1992: 127). Or, in the words of Dore, education in Japan works "provided one thinks of it as an enormously elaborated, very expensive intelligence testing system with some educational spin-off, rather than the other way round" (1976: 48--49).

SUGGESTIONS

(1) Strict and clear rules, written out and explained to students

(2) Goal in English classes should be to "reactivate" what they already know. Key is to use what students already know. Do not spend too much time correcting grammar

(3) Use texts only minimally

(4) Break up cliques

(5) Give a lot of homework

(6) Eliminate troublemakers. They are ruining the class for other students who do want to learn

(7) Have students write a weekly essay about one page long. Have them read it aloud to the other students, and correct only major problems. Writing is thinking, and besides building students' confidence, it is a way to have the students show the teacher their hidden individual talents and personalities.

NOTES

[1]Here it is worth noting Weber's observation that "The modern development of full bureacratization brings the system of rational, specialized, and expert examinations irresistibly to the fore" (in Gerth and Mills 1958:241).

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